



Being Transformed

With the Present 'Now' and Presence as a driving force.

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Beth Juncker

Keynote: Being transformed – presence and participation

Abstract

Professor Beth Juncker has criticized the DICE Report to exaggerate its conclusions. At the same time, she notes that in relation to the Nordic countries there has not been done much to develop creative, innovative and communicative skills. The challenge is that in the drama and theater sphere educational responses are still being sought to legitimate and integrate the value-in-itself-ness that characterizes paradigms in aesthetic and artistic learning-processes. Professor Beth Juncker will seek to answer vitally: How can working with art and culture lead to a paradigm, which in its practice form with drama and theater has the 'Now' and 'Presence' as a driving force?

Keywords

Drama; Boreale; Explore; Express; Exchange; theatre; presence; participation; Child culture; children's culture; Gumbrecht; Böhme; Juncker;

Introduction

In all the Nordic countries we have had a dream. If we develop a strong connection between children's playing processes, their different kind of meetings with art and culture and the formal learning processes in the social and educational sectors, we will form motivated, smiling and singing children learning how to read, write and reckon in almost no time! The meaning of meetings with art, artists and culture was regarded as instruments to serve formal educational and social empowerment purposes. Benedicte Kier, a former Danish minister of social welfare, underlined this conviction when she in 2011 set out to fight the tradition for 'free play' in Danish day care institutions:

It is awful that one in so many day care institutions allow the children themselves to put limits and to decide what they want to do. Children need to be guided and to learn.

We have in the Nordic countries throughout the 20th century developed a dominant instrumental tradition using play, art and culture as a vehicle for teaching and formal learning processes. The key cultural policy words have been: learning and literacy (Juncker, 2015: 22, 27, 28). There are much to be learned from involvement with cultural and artistic experiences and creative processes. But school curriculum is not central. It is a different kind of informal learning which is at stake here. It is a new kind of creative and investigating skills which are developed.

I have taken part in the discussions of these dreams of a direct connection between play, playfulness and formal competencies for many years. I have always stressed that it is wonderful to dream. I have also meant that not all dreams will come true. But – actually a modified version of this dream might come true if politicians start to listen to researchers' investigation of the relations between children, art and culture – and to pose the right questions. Don't ask for what children learned from these meetings. Ask for what these experiences and creative processes meant to them, their playmates and their daily playing communities.

Drama Boreale focuses on the meaning of children's meeting with theatre performances in different contexts – in day care, in school time and in leisure time: Children as audiences. It also focuses on the meaning *for* children to take part in a creative process making a theatre performance: Children as creators – play writers, producers, scenographers, musicians, actors, dancers, costumiers, managers of light and sound. If we want to encircle the meaning, the purpose with these encounters, what do we have to look for? Which questions do we have to ask?

In relation to theatre experiences we have to ask: What happens hopefully when you enter an arena? What does it mean to be part of an audience? What's the meaning?

In relation to theatre productions we have to stress that this is a professional knowledge field examining feelings, themes, conflicts on aesthetic-symbolic conditions by means of artistic theories and methods. The field has been built on theories, terms, techniques and skills needed to investigate the subject and to produce the performance. To be a producer, an actor, a dancer, a musician is to belong to a professional knowledge field. What does it mean for children to meet an artist and to be part of a producing team and a creative process? Which kind of knowledge and skills is needed and what do the children learn from

it? Finally, we have to ask: what does the different kind of contexts mean? Does the meaning change from kindergarten, to schools, to spare time? How do we understand meetings with art, artists and culture which not actually make a *difference* in and for children's social and educational institutions? This article tries to answer these questions by taking a closer look at the transformations needed in order to make a difference and contribute to meaning for the children.

Aesthetics and play

To come closer to the answers, we have to start with the basic: aesthetics. Aesthetics is daily practice and aesthetics is daily participation. All of us practice and participate every day. It is an important part of our lives. We wouldn't be us without it! The most central concept of aesthetics is the notion of play (Huizinga, 1938) and the two most central phenomenon connected to play is participation, atmosphere and presence (Gumbrecht (2004), Böhme (2013)).



This is Pieter Breughel – a painting of play, atmosphere, participation and presence from 1565. The painting describes play, playing activities and the atmosphere and intensity related. The middle age social reality with all privileges, hierarchies, power and cruelties has disappeared for a while or two. The cultural reality opening atmosphere, participation, presence, fun, values and meanings for the participants is ruling. Some of them do odd stuff with tools or with each other, some are dancing or listening to a storyteller. They all do it freely. None of

them would be able to do what they do without genres, patterns, rules or tools. They do it because it is fun – and fun in these aesthetic symbolic surroundings means worthwhile and meaningful!

If you zoom in you might find these special intensive moments:



Photo: Georg Roldan

Take a good look at this photo. It gives us a picture of the very center of a theatre experience. The German-American researcher Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (2004) calls it: presence! What does it mean?

The kids have left the social reality – everyday life, schools, day care – and entered an arena which makes participation in an artistic experience possible. The shift from social reality to cultural reality is a shift of reality conditions. Entering a cultural arena means to leave the social conditions behind and to face the demanding aesthetic-symbolic conditions ruling our meetings with art and culture. From the moment the kids entered, they have been transformed – from Anna, Maria, Mohammad and Peter – to the participating, experiencing collective community we call an *audience* (Conner (2009), Waade (2002)). They are now an active part of a performance. They contribute to the experiences that the aesthetic-symbolic activities on stage make possible. Together with actors, dancers, musicians on the stage, *they* are responsible for the meaning created here and now for half an hour or two. When they leave the arena – the theatre, the movie, the concert or dance hall – they will again *almost* be Anna, Maria, Mohammad and Peter. Almost – they have participated in, contributed to

and shared an experience, they can exchange meanings and values from it. They can love it, hate it, quarrel about it. It is a central part of the meaning creation. The transformation to an audience, the arena and the aesthetic-symbolic processes give access to dimensions of our common life that we can't reach on other conditions – to feelings, values. So – theatre is a democratic arena meant to make a difference on aesthetic-symbolic conditions – to make it possible for all of us to feel, to discuss, to quarrel, to agree, to negotiate feelings, values and meanings central to us. It is a vital part of our democracy! What you learn here by being present and participating is not Norwegian, Swedish, Finnish, Icelandic or to read, write and reckon. You learn what is important and precious and meaningful to you and you learn, that sometimes you must accept that you have to fight and argue for your feelings and opinions!

If you zoom in on other parts of Breughel's painting, you might find this:







Before this photo was taken, the kids have negotiated. They have agreed on a play and its rules – an invisible, but necessary pattern. Now they practice it in an atmosphere of total concentration and presence.



You will not find this. We did not have printed books among ordinary people at Breughel's time and most of them couldn't read or write. But they had lots of songs, stories and storytellers. A storyteller and the stories are a means for leaving the social and entering the cultural aesthetic-symbolic dimension. A printed book is a tool for the same. When you open it, you have the possibility to leave the social reality behind and to be part of the book's aesthetic-symbolic universe while reading, if you find it worthwhile!



There are lots of other tools in action in Breughel's painting – but not these! If he had painted today, we might have met these two girls too. They are concentrated, intensively absorbed, totally present.

What I have shown you here are photos of daily playing, participating, experiencing – photos of different aesthetic experiences and practices in everyday life. And at the same time photos of the very meaning with different kinds of meetings with and participating with and through art and culture: to leave the social reality for a while, to be transformed, to be part of a playing, creating, participating, experiencing community or an audience or a universe on aesthetic-symbolic conditions an hour or two makes an important difference in our lives!

Art and culture – for the sake of us!

Art has never been for the sake of art. It has always been for the sake of us! Play has never served anything but fun, joy, meaningfulness for the players.

Why do we build theatres, concert halls, cinemas, museums, operas, sport arenas? To be able to leave the social reality and ourselves for a while, to be transformed to the participating, experiencing collective we call audience, to be able to meet and experience, to discuss

and negotiate values, to express or scream meanings and feelings which are important to us and important to our common life in a society. Why do cultural policy and tax money support productions of literature, theatre, performances, dance, music, paintings, exhibitions, installations, films and media? Why do cultural policy, cultural strategies, cultural dissemination and mediation find it crucial to support our and children's possibilities to meet and to participate in these special aesthetic symbolic processes and experiences?

In the preface to the new cultural strategies addressing children and young people the former Danish minister of culture Marianne Jelved answers these questions:

Art and culture should be a part of children's and young people's lives from a very early age. In an everyday life where an awful lot is individualized and measured against its visible and measurable utility value, we may overlook the real nature of art and culture. It is that which creates cohesion; that which sparks reflection and insight; that which gives us the communities that make us who we are and gives us a fundamental common agreement about the meaning of our society. You are shaped as a citizen and equal participant in communities when you experience art in a community where, in dialogue with others, you reflect on art and on what it does to you and your experience of it.

The answer is social cohesion, social identity, social meaning and value creation. It might be an exaggeration to point to 'a fundamental common agreement about the meaning of our society', but without access to these experiences and processes we would not be able to negotiate or quarrel on feelings, values and meanings. In a democracy disagreements are as crucial as agreements!

Meaning creation and inspiration across borders

Twice I have had the privilege to accompany some of the Danish theatres, dance companies and orchestras playing for children and young people to China. I attended several Danish performances during the visit. Allow me to tell you about one of them and to add a Chinese example too.

This particular evening in Shanghai I was seated next to a small Chinese boy. Between 8 and 9 years old I suppose. I had noticed him, nodded and smiled, of course, but beyond that he did not occupy my mind. I do have a natural disrespect for grownups wasting their time during performances observing children!

We were going to attend a performance by The Danish Rakkerpak *The Boxer and the Ballerina*. One of the actors, Niels Peter Kløft, had entered the hall. He was walking around, looking at us, greeting some of us, speaking Danish to the Chinese, nonsense to the Danes, rearranging some of the spectators in order to make them see better, wrapping others in woolen blankets to make them feel comfortable. Little by little he transformed the room to an arena and each of us Chinese Danish individuals to an audience. We were ready to participate!

The Boxer and the Ballerina is a story about a boy with a father dreaming of his son as a great boxer and a girl with a mother dreaming of her daughter as a great ballerina. The boy himself wants to be a dancer, the girl to be a boxer. Quite simple – quite complicated! Do we have to fulfill our parents dreams? Do we have to follow an outdated pattern of gender?

Approximately 5 minutes after the performance had started the Chinese boy leaned against me, seized my sleeve and laughed. Two minutes later he got on his feet crying from laughter. After another 5 minutes I found him rolling on the ground between my feet howling with laughter. It was a bit difficult not to pay attention and to join his expressive joy.

For him the performance became a force, an energy, which seized him and now was shaping his body. He tried again and again to sit down and hold his sides, but in vain. He participated 150%. An unforgettable evening!

Some of us were invited to attend the only Chinese theatre addressing children outside schools in Shanghai. To get economical support to theatre performances addressing children outside Chinese educational institutions is difficult. In the Nordic countries we have had a strong educational tradition asking theatres to directly support school curriculum. It is now in transition toward a view on meetings with art and culture which recognizes the independent value. In China there is no sign of transition or transformation. So being a director of a small theatre addressing children and their families in spare time really depended on success. She had to amuse and to please not only the children, but also their parents. The performance we saw used, we were told, well known television characters as a means. What attracted my attention was not so much the performance. It was noisy and colorful. It was the behavior of the parents accompanying the children. They were not on time. They disturbed 10 – 15 minutes after the performance had started asking everybody to stand up so that they could find their places. Being seated they constantly talked together behind the backs of the children or in front of them. All of them were armed with mobile phones and they used them – talked aloud, sent SMS, checked mails. And if this was not enough they also went to and fro, constantly disturbing the children and other parents with better manners. One second I thought: well this is like in the old theatres in Greece and London with a participating commenting, shouting, eating and drinking audience (Conner, 2009). Two minutes after I knew I was wrong. The old participating audiences constantly focused on the stage and the performance. They commented what they saw they commanded actors to leave the stage because they disliked their acting and others to enter. The Chinese parents never looked at the stage, they didn't know what was at stake at all which meant that they didn't respect the actors who fought and fought to establish this special 4th dimension needed for the children to be transformed, to participate and be present. They had bought tickets, they had apparently the right not to be transformed, not to participate, not to be present. Part of the performance was a lesson in the impact of teeth brushing. The actors ended the performance throwing out candy to the kids!

I have often in order to tease the dreams of theatre supporting day care or school curriculum said that the cultural sectors have many kinds of arenas but kindergartens and gym halls are not amongst them. Today I have to admit that theatre actually can happen everywhere. It started out at market places in front of churches way back. Today we find it in streets and parks and festivals – and in theatre buildings. But the building itself is no guarantee. If the audience as in China does not accept or is not allowed to leave the surrounding reality, to enter a different reality, to be transformed to a present participating collective audience, theatre is not possible.

Entering a theatre performance all other places than in theatre buildings you are met by the artists or their helpers. You are – even in your own institution – entering *their* room and facing *their* conditions and here the transformations starts. As an adult – a pedagogue, a teacher, a parent – entering the arena together with the kids you are transformed too. You are no longer in power, you do not have the right to yield or to command, you have been part of the audience. As a part of the audience it is your duty to experience and participate together with the kids, not to observe them. You can give a hand, you can take one on your knees, you can even leave the room if the experience is too overwhelming to a kid. But – that's it!

Some months ago I attended a performance together with day care kids, their pedagogues and a bunch of conference participants. A one-woman show. Part of the performance was a small section where some of the kids were invited to take the end of a rope and to get a symbolic tour de force around the room. I gave a key note after the performance and took examples from it. One of the pedagogues had blamed the actor: you did not notice that Brian and Anne and Peter and Sofie also wanted to try. What she meant was that the actor acted non-social. The actor was nice, so she answered: Yes, I did notice, but I didn't have the time. I'm sorry. No, she was not sorry! Afterwards I had to stress: having been part of a performance opens the possibility to like or not like it, to discuss and to critique, to agree. That is why having been part of an audience contribute to democratic dialogues and negotiations. But – the theatre performance itself is not democratic. If all the kids had to try we would have been sitting there still – the rhythm and balance, the composition of the performance would have been spoiled and we would have been extremely bored. This is the actor's artistic responsibility. The pedagogue felt offended. The kids had forgotten it a minute later!

The roots



We are all born with the desire to play, to raise this special atmosphere and room which gives access to fun, feelings, values, bricks of identity. But we are not born with the abilities to do so. We have to take part in the cultural play heritage, we have little by little to look, to learn and to practice the genres, patterns, tools which give skills and competencies to raise this special cultural reality which is there when we experience or practice and which fade away when we stop.

The English pediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott calls it »The potential Room« and sees it as the cradle of culture. The Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky names it 'the zone of proximal development', and the Dutch researcher in play as a cultural phenomenon Johan Huizinga sees it as a primary category of life which cannot be understood or evaluated from outside. You have to be present and participating to understand, feel and appreciate the value. It is here we by means of body, movement, voices, tools and simple patterns start to practice: to open the cultural reality, the fourth dimension depending of play, presence and participation.

It continues here:



Photo: Katrine Friis



Photo: Lotte Damsgaard



Photo: Lotte Damsgaard

This is the meaning! When this happens, theater is worthwhile! When it does not happen, well...

The lesson

Professional performances for children are *not* intellectual exercises for beginners.

Professional performances have *not* been produced in order to make children healthier, more tolerant, more democratic, well-bred or literate.

Professional performances for children and young people have *not* been produced and performed to serve the pedagogical developmental work in daycare institutions. The meaning of this particular art form is *not* to contribute to the schools formal teaching, not even to learn children about art.

The meaning is to make laughter bubble, the roof of the theater symbolical rise, tears burst, to make silence noisy. If the performance does not give meaning to the audience here and now, if the audience is bored with proper opinions, worthy values, it will never be part of their life after. They won't tell others about it, they won't take inspiration from it, they won't use it as bricks to identity building. They will just forget it!

The crucial point is the meeting, the moment, the participation and the presence in the fourth dimension we call expressive life! But you might ask: do children have the cultural competencies needed? Yes! Depending on age they have them on different levels. They have been practicing since they were born.

Children's playing cultural communities

Children's playing communities *communicate through action*. It is a community, which constantly *deals with transformations*. You can actually be what you eat. A community *practicing the aesthetic-symbolic dimension – fictions – every day*. In this dimension *everything can take place, but never ever for real*. And there is *one golden rule* here: children never start activities, they don't like.

As adults we are confronted with a community, which carefully distinguish between social reality and cultural reality. Social reality just is. Cultural reality, you have to create and maintain yourself. Cultural reality, they know it, is only present as a fourth dimension raising *while* you are running, jumping, swinging, singing, playing, listening, looking, reading, talking, laughing. A way of life connected to the very moment, the now and here.

This fourth – aesthetic-symbolic – dimension is the Alfa and Omega of children's culture. So don't ever underestimate them! And don't underestimate the joy and inspiration they can experience as part of a creative team.

I have now to the best of my knowledge answered the first set of questions: what does it mean to be part of an audience? What happens hopefully when you enter an arena? What's the meaning?

I will jump to the final question and return to the second.

What does the different kind of contexts mean? Does the meaning change from kindergarten, to schools to spare time? How do we understand meetings with art and artists which makes a difference?

Does the meaning change from context to context? No, not at all! When a theatre arrives, an arena is set and a performance is going to start in a kindergarten or a school gym exactly the same as outside these institutions happens: you leave day care or school every day pattern – the social reality in these contexts. You and the kids enter the arena, you are transformed

to an audience and ready for the experiences that cultural reality, the aesthetic-symbolic conditions can offer an hour or two. What's the meaning? To make a *difference*. This is not what we usually do, this is different. *The difference is the point*. To enrich kindergartens or schools with this important difference theatres and performances need to arrive as theater, not as a part of everyday activities or curriculum, not as a support to math or languages, but as a new opening to feelings, to fun, to expression, creativity, to dialogue.

So if you ask the pupils to write an essay or to describe what they witnessed, I do hope someone nearby has the license to kill! What theater can, is not kindergarten or school stuff. It is unique and different. It represents another way of knowing and showing. Theater is not an instrument for whatever outside. So when theatres arrive to day care or schools they arrive as an offer, a break to kids, to pedagogues, to teachers. You have to welcome them, you have to open facilities for them, but after that you just have to be exited, to participate and to enjoy. What is going on is not your responsibility! If the grownups don't experience with the children, they can't contribute to the common dialogues and discussions that the experience opened. You don't need to be clever, you don't need to know, you just need to be transformed and present!

In all the Nordic countries we know that child culture and children's culture have 3 legs:

Children's culture: that's the roots, that's what they bring with them everywhere and all over – in homes, leisure time, kindergartens, schools. The desire for play, for fun, for meaningfulness.

Culture for children: professionals who produce artistic experiences for children. That's what I have been talking most about until now.

The third leg is *Culture with children*: professionals inviting children to participate in a creative process. Cultural schools and workshops do it and in Denmark, I do think in Norway, Sweden, Finland and Iceland too, we also have possibilities for artists in residence. Artists, who are invited to a kindergarten or a school in a period in order to work together with the kids.

The overall challenge both in relation to culture for and culture with children is the collaboration between professions – artists, pedagogues, teachers. Artists are not going to be pedagogues or teachers. Teachers and pedagogues are not going to be artists. If you invite an artist to come and work with the kids, you invite a professional and it is what these professionals can contribute with as professionals that matters. If they were just another pedagogue or teacher it would be meaningless! As a pedagogue or a teacher you can choose to be part of the team and the creative process, you can choose to participate, to experience another way of looking and working. If you are not able to do so, then stay away, take a break, go home!

August last year I was talking with an artist, a painter, at the cultural meeting in Nykøbing Mors. He had been invited to a school to work with some of the kids. When he arrived, he was met by the head of the school: here you have a wall, we want you and the pupils to paint an elephant! He answered, I have not come here to paint elephants, I have come to start a work, a creative process together with the kids. How it will end I don't know. You can paint your fucking elephant yourself if you want it!

What does it mean to meet an artist or several and to be part of a producing team? Which kind of knowledge and skills is needed and what do the children learn from it?

Discipline, engagement, respect for deadlines – and hard, hard work. Beside that: creativity, despair, how to seek information you don't have, but have to have now, how to solve problems quickly, how to train and train again and again, boring but needed, the need of convincing arguments and the thrill of working together with schoolmates when all the conflicts, problems, challenges are almost solved. Last, but not least: an insight in how to create, develop and perform an offer to an audience it can't refuse – to make a performance which actually has the potential to open for participation and presence leave you with an insight in the special knowledge and challenges of a professional field. The vision of these creative meetings between artists and children is to give children access to new languages and insight in formative methods as roads towards sensitive types of knowledge. A supplement to day care practice and to school curriculum built on the wish to make a difference. Did I answer the second question? I hope so!

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